

The Names

"I love you in my own way."

Hong

The studio was different at 7 AM.

No chaos of deadline energy, no overlapping voices, no smell of too-strong coffee competing with turpentine. Just quiet light filtering through the east-facing windows, catching dust motes that drifted like thoughts not yet formed, and the particular stillness of a space waiting to be used. The canvases leaned against walls in their finished states, silent witnesses to months of work and doubt and the particular madness that came from trying to make the invisible visible.

I'd come early on purpose.

Needed the silence to hear myself think. Needed the absence of other people's energy—their stress, their deadlines, their creative crises bleeding into the air—so I could finally figure out what my paintings were trying to say. For weeks I'd been circling this moment, approaching and retreating like someone afraid to touch something that might burn them. But I couldn't circle anymore. The exhibition was eleven days away, and the catalog needed titles and descriptions, and I couldn't keep pretending that the blankness in my notebook was anything other than fear.

My notebook lay open on my lap, the same pages that had mocked me two days ago. The same emptiness that had felt like accusation, like proof that I wasn't a real artist, that I'd been fooling everyone including myself. But something had shifted since then.

Something had cracked open in that pastel café, with Nut sitting across from me and the words I'd been terrified to speak finally hanging in the air between us. I'd told him. I'd told him everything—the years of confusion, the relationships I'd sabotaged, the bone-deep fear that I was fundamentally broken. And he'd listened. And he'd stayed. And he'd said I'll say it tomorrow too. And the day after. For as long as you need to hear it.

The memory still made my chest tight, but in a different way now. Not the tightness of fear. The tightness of something too large trying to fit inside a space that had been empty for so long.

Now words were rising to the surface like air bubbles in water—slowly at first, then faster, demanding to be acknowledged. The dam had broken somewhere between the café and this quiet morning, and I was finally ready to see what had been waiting on the other side.

I looked at the first painting.

Two figures at a threshold.

One in shadow, one in light. Their hands reaching toward each other across the divide, fingers extended, the space between them charged with everything that almost-touching contains. I'd worked on this piece for three weeks, obsessing over the quality of that almost. The way the light bled into darkness at the edges, suggesting that the boundary wasn't as absolute as it appeared. The tension in the reaching hands—not quite desperate, not quite calm, but something in between.

For weeks, I'd thought this painting was about fear.

About the space between people, the gap that felt impossible to cross. About all the times I'd stood at the edge of connection and pulled back, convinced that what waited on the other side would hurt me. About the particular loneliness of wanting to reach out and not knowing how. But sitting here now, with Nut's words still echoing in my memory—I stayed because of it—I understood something different.

The space between the figures wasn't emptiness. It was choice.

The hands weren't failing to connect. They were about to.

The whole painting was a breath held before a decision. Not fear, but the moment just before courage. Not the tragedy of distance, but the possibility that distance could be closed. The figures weren't frozen in failure—they were suspended in potential, on the edge of something that could change everything.

I'd painted hope and called it fear because I didn't know how to recognize hope when I felt it.

I wrote in my notebook, the pen moving with a certainty that surprised me:

Title: "Almost"

Description: The distance between reaching and touching. The hope that lives in the space between. For everyone who has stood at the edge of connection and wondered if they were brave enough to cross.

I read it back. Once, twice, three times. It wasn't perfect—probably never would be. But it was true, and I was learning that true mattered more than perfect. True was what you could stand behind when someone asked you what your art meant. True was what didn't crumble when people looked too closely.

The first painting had a name now. I'd claimed it. Something in my chest loosened, like a knot I'd forgotten I was carrying had finally come undone.

The second painting.

A single figure curled in on themselves, surrounded by soft things—blankets and

cushions and the suggestion of stuffed animals at the edges of the frame. The colors were warm, the textures rendered with obsessive attention to the way fabric folded and light caught on surfaces. Everything about the composition said comfort, said safety, said rest.

But I'd painted it after one of my worst nights.

The kind where sleep wouldn't come and my thoughts kept spiraling into familiar darkness, circling the same questions over and over: What's wrong with you? Why can't you just be normal? Why do you push everyone away before they can see how broken you are? I'd gotten out of bed at 2 AM and started painting because it was better than lying there listening to my own accusations.

I'd been thinking about protection and isolation. About the thin line between building a sanctuary and building a prison. About whether the walls I'd constructed around myself were keeping danger out or keeping me trapped inside.

When I'd finished the painting, I hadn't known which it was. The ambiguity had felt like failure—like I'd tried to say something and ended up saying nothing, like even my art couldn't decide what I actually meant. But now, with Lego's voice in my head—the world has a lot of sharp edges—I saw something else.

The figure wasn't trapped. They were resting.

The soft things weren't walls. They were choices. Deliberate acts of self-care, surrounding oneself with gentleness because the world wouldn't always provide it. The figure had looked at the sharpness outside and decided to build something soft inside, and that wasn't weakness or avoidance—it was wisdom. It was survival. It was the particular intelligence of someone who had learned that they were allowed to be gentle with themselves.

And the ambiguity I'd worried about was actually the point.

Safe or trapped? Both. Neither. The answer depended on who was looking, on what they needed to see. Someone who felt suffocated by their own defenses would see a cage. Someone who had never felt safe would see a haven. The painting didn't offer answers because life didn't offer answers—only questions, and the courage to sit with them.

I thought about Lego's apartment, with its stuffed animals on every surface and its flower teas and its particular quality of designed softness. He'd built a fortress against the world's sharp edges, and I'd seen it for what it was—not childish, not naive, but profoundly wise. A nineteen-year-old who had been abandoned by his parents and lost his sister and carried everyone else's weight without complaint, and he'd chosen to surround himself with gentle things because he knew that gentleness was a form of resistance.

Maybe that's what the painting was really about. Not the question of whether safety became a trap, but the recognition that sometimes you had to build your own softness. Sometimes you had to decide that you deserved comfort, even when the world disagreed.

I wrote:

Title: "Fortress"

Description: The things we build to survive can become the things that keep us trapped. But sometimes a fortress is just a home that hasn't found its door yet. For everyone who learned to make themselves safe before they learned they were allowed to be seen.

The words felt right. Not just accurate, but earned—the kind of description that could only come from someone who understood what they were describing, who had lived inside that particular question. I was smiling now, something I hadn't expected. The words were coming faster, the connections clearer. It was like the confession to Nut had unclogged something in my creative process, allowing thoughts that had been stuck to finally flow. All those months of writer's block, of staring at blank pages, of feeling like I had nothing worth saying—they were over. Not because I'd become someone different, but because I'd finally admitted who I already was.

The third painting.

The mirror.

I couldn't look at it for long. It was too raw, too recent, too directly connected to the parts of myself I'd spent years trying to hide. Even now, sitting in this quiet studio with dawn light softening everything, the painting made something in my stomach clench.

A face that was mine and not mine, rendered in the particular distortion of reflection. The features were accurate—anyone who knew me would recognize the face—but something was off. The proportions slightly wrong. The expression caught in the moment between recognition and estrangement. The background deliberately empty, just the figure and its reflection confronting each other across the silver surface.

I'd painted it at 3 AM, two months ago.

One of those nights when sleep felt like a foreign concept and my thoughts kept circling back to the same questions, the same fears, the same relentless voice that told me I was broken. What's wrong with me? The question had been louder than usual that night, more insistent. Why can't I just be normal? Like something was fundamentally missing, some essential piece that everyone else had been born with

and I'd somehow lost. What if everyone figures out that I'm broken? The fear that kept me at arm's length from every relationship, every connection, every person who got close enough to matter.

I'd gotten out of bed and painted because I didn't know what else to do. The mirror had been across the room, and I'd caught my own reflection, and something about the way I looked in that moment—tired and afraid and so desperately lost—had demanded to be captured.

The painting was the result. A document of my worst moment, preserved in oil and canvas.

But now...Now I'd told someone the truth. Now I'd been looked at—really looked at, with all my complications and fears laid bare—and not found wanting. Nut had heard everything I was terrified to say, and instead of leaving, he'd leaned closer. Instead of retreating, he'd reached out.

I fell for you because you were complicated and sharp and unexpectedly soft when you thought no one was watching.

The words still echoed in my head, rewriting something I'd believed for so long that I'd forgotten it was a belief and not a fact. I'd thought my complications made me less lovable. He'd said they made me more interesting.

Now I knew that the face in the mirror, the one I'd been afraid of, was just me. Not broken. Not less than. Not something that needed to be fixed or hidden or explained away.

Just different.

And different, as my sister had told me years ago, as Lego had reminded me days ago, as Nut had shown me with every patient word—different wasn't broken. Different was just different. A variation, not a failure. A way of being, not a way of being wrong.

I looked at the painting with new eyes.

The distortion I'd captured wasn't ugliness. It was honesty—the recognition that we never see ourselves clearly, that the mirror always lies a little, that the gap between how we appear and how we feel is part of being human. The figure wasn't recoiling from its reflection in horror. It was studying it, trying to understand, suspended in the moment of choosing whether to accept or reject what it saw. And acceptance, I was learning, was possible. Acceptance was not just possible but necessary—the first step toward anything that came after.

I wrote, slower this time because the words mattered more:

Title: "The Real Me"

Description: What we see when we finally stop pretending. The terror and the freedom of being exactly who we are. For everyone who has looked in a mirror and wondered if what they saw was worthy of love.

The last sentence caught in my throat as I wrote it. Worthy of love. Such a simple phrase. Such an enormous question. I'd spent my whole life assuming the answer was no—or at least, no for the real me, the me without masks, the me that existed underneath all the careful performance. But Nut had looked at that real me and said yes. And I was starting to believe him.

I set down my pen.

The three paintings looked back at me from their positions against the wall, and for the first time, I didn't feel the urge to look away. I didn't feel the creeping shame that usually accompanied confronting my own work, the voice that whispered this isn't good enough, you're not good enough, everyone will see right through you.

The paintings were pieces of me, yes. Vulnerable and honest and potentially embarrassing. But they were also good. They said something worth saying. They captured experiences that other people might recognize, feelings that other people might share. They reached across the space between artist and viewer and said I've felt this too.

And in eleven days, other people would see them. Strangers would stand in front of these canvases, these fragments of my soul, and try to understand what they were looking at. They'd read the descriptions I'd written and make their own interpretations. They'd agree or disagree, connect or dismiss, feel something or feel nothing.

And whatever happened after that was outside my control.

The realization should have been terrifying. Instead, it felt like freedom. I'd done my part. I'd painted honestly. I'd named what I'd made. I'd claimed the pieces of myself that I'd been afraid to acknowledge. Whatever came next was just... life. Continuing to unfold, continuing to surprise, continuing to be both harder and easier than I expected.

I could live with that.

My phone buzzed.

A message from Nut, and even seeing his name on my screen made something warm bloom in my chest:

Nut: Good morning! Did you sleep okay? I kept thinking about our conversation and wanted to make sure you're doing alright.

I smiled at the screen. Such a simple check-in. Such an enormous thing, to have

someone who cared enough to ask. To have someone who was thinking about me, worrying about me, hoping I was okay—not because they wanted something from me, but because they wanted something for me.

I'd spent so long believing I didn't deserve that kind of care. Believing that people who got close would eventually see my flaws and leave. Believing that love was something other people got to have, something that required a wholeness I didn't possess. And now here was Nut, sending good morning texts, asking about my sleep, being present in all the small ways that added up to something enormous.

I slept better than I have in months, I typed back. And I just finished naming my paintings.

The reply came almost immediately:

Nut: That's amazing!! Can I see them? Or is that against artist rules?

Me: You can see them at the exhibition. Like everyone else.

Nut: Wow. Rude. I thought we had something special.

Me: We do. That's why you have to wait. I want to see your face when you see them for real.

A pause. Then:

Nut: Okay. That's actually really sweet. I take back the "rude."

Me: You should. I'm extremely sweet.

Nut: The sweetest. A sugar cube in human form.

Me: Now you're just being ridiculous.

Nut: And yet you're still smiling. I can tell.

He wasn't wrong. I was smiling—the kind of smile that used to feel foreign on my face, too genuine and unguarded for the person I'd trained myself to be. For years, I'd kept my expressions carefully controlled, never too happy or too sad or too anything. Showing too much meant being vulnerable. Being vulnerable meant being hurt. But I was tired of protecting myself from the possibility of joy. I was tired of dimming my own light to avoid casting shadows. I was tired of being so afraid of being hurt that I forgot how to be happy.

The smile stayed on my face as I put my phone away, and I let it stay. Let it be evidence of something shifting.

The studio door opened, and classmates began to filter in. The space transformed gradually from empty sanctuary to working environment—voices overlapping,

coffee being brewed, the particular energy of people running out of time building in the air. I moved my things to make room for others, answered questions about installation requirements, nodded along to conversations about lighting and placement and all the practical concerns that came with putting on an exhibition.

But underneath the logistics, something was different. I felt lighter. Settled in a way I hadn't been for months. The weight I'd been carrying—the unnamed paintings, the unspoken confession, the constant fear of being found out—had lifted. Not disappeared entirely, but distributed differently. Shared, now, with the people I'd trusted. The people who had shown up.

The coordinator found me at my station mid-morning, clipboard in hand, her expression the particular blend of efficiency and exhaustion that characterized the final push before a show.

"Hong." She stopped, pen poised. "I need your titles and descriptions by end of day. Can you do that?"

"Already done." I handed her my notebook, open to the pages I'd filled that morning. The words I'd written, careful and deliberate, claiming what I'd made.

Her eyebrows rose—surprise, maybe, or suspicion that I'd rushed through it. But she read what I'd written, and something in her expression shifted. The efficiency softened into something more genuine, more present. "These are good," she said. Not enthusiastic, but honest. The kind of praise that mattered because it wasn't given lightly. "Really good. The ambiguity in 'Fortress'—that's intentional?"

"Yes."

"It works." She made a note on her clipboard, then looked at me with something that might have been respect. "Nice work, Hong. I'm looking forward to seeing these pieces."

She moved on to the next station, and I was left with the strange sensation of having done something right. Of having met an expectation I'd been dreading for weeks. Of being, maybe, the kind of artist I'd always wanted to be but was too afraid to believe I could become.

My phone buzzed again. This time, it was Lego:

Lego: STAR COOKIE UPDATE: I made a second batch and they're even better. You HAVE to come try them.

I laughed out loud, drawing curious glances from nearby students. Lego's messages were always like this—urgent about small things, full of enthusiasm that seemed impossible to contain, radiating the particular energy of someone who believed that life should be celebrated at every opportunity.



Me: I was just there last night.

Lego: Yes, and that was LAST NIGHT. This is TODAY. Different cookies. Different moment. Different level of deliciousness.

Me: You're going to make yourself sick eating that much sugar.

Lego: Worth it. Also, P'Tui is coming over later. He says he wants to "check on me" but I think he just wants cookies too.

Something in my chest warmed at that. Tui, finally showing up. Finally letting himself be present in Lego's space instead of hovering at a careful distance, using logic and excuses to justify the wall he'd built around his heart.

I thought about what Est had told me—the text he'd sent Tui after that night at Lego's apartment. Stop protecting him from yourself. He's stronger than you think. And Tui's reply: I know. That's what scares me.

Maybe something had finally shifted. Maybe Tui was learning to be scared and show up anyway. Maybe the chosen family was teaching him what it had taught me—that the people who loved you didn't need you to be perfect. They just needed you to be present.

Me: Tell him I said hi.

Lego: I will! He asks about you, you know. About how you're doing.

Me: What do you tell him?

Lego: That you're the bravest person I know. And that you eat too many of my snacks without saying thank you.

Me: I always say thank you.

Lego: You say it IRONICALLY. That doesn't count.

I was still smiling when I put my phone away. The studio buzzed with activity around me, but I felt insulated somehow—wrapped in the warmth of connections that existed across the city, in apartments and studios and the particular spaces where people chose to show up for each other.

Lego, with his star-shaped cookies and stuffed animal witnesses. Tui, learning to be brave. Est, healing one day at a time. Nut, patient and hopeful and impossibly kind.

The circle was real. The chosen family was real. And I was part of it—not despite who I was, but because of it.

That evening, I walked to Ink & Ashes.

I hadn't planned to—had intended to go home, eat something that wasn't café pastry, maybe work on some sketches for the clothing line that had been neglected during exhibition prep. But my feet carried me toward the familiar façade without conscious decision, like the studio had become a kind of homing beacon, a place my body knew to return to when my mind was too full of other things.

The lights were on inside, warm yellow against the evening dark.

Through the window, I could see Tui at his station, bent over someone's arm with the focused intensity that meant he was in the middle of a piece. The buzz of the tattoo machine was faintly audible through the glass, a sound I'd come to associate with concentration and care and the particular alchemy of turning skin into canvas.

Est was there too, camera in hand, documenting something—maybe the tattoo in progress, maybe just the atmosphere. He moved with the practiced fluidity of someone who'd found their rhythm, who knew where to stand and when to shoot and how to capture the moments that mattered.

I stood outside for a moment, watching them through the window. They'd become part of my landscape. These people who'd entered my life through a series of coincidences—a job at a tattoo studio, a friend of a friend, the complicated web of William's implosion—and stayed through choice. The chosen family that Lego talked about, building itself one connection at a time, one shared meal and late-night conversation and moment of showing up when someone needed you.

I hadn't known, when I first started working here, that this was what I was looking for. Hadn't known that the silver-haired tattoo apprentice who kept to himself and made dry observations from the corner was someone who desperately needed people to see him. Hadn't known that beneath my own defenses was a person who wanted to be known. But here I was. Here they were. And somehow, improbably, we'd found each other.

I pushed through the door. The bell announced my arrival, and both of them looked up. Est raised a hand in greeting, that photographer's attention lingering for a moment before returning to his work. Tui nodded without breaking his rhythm, the needle steady in his hand.

"You're not supposed to be working tonight," Est said. "I thought you were doing exhibition prep."

"I was." I settled onto one of the waiting chairs, letting the familiar sounds wash over me. The buzz of the machine. The low music from the speakers—something instrumental, probably one of Tui's curated playlists. The particular quality of silence that came from people comfortable in each other's presence, not needing to fill every moment with words. "Finished early."

"The paintings?"

"Named and described. Ready for the catalog."

Est's eyebrows rose—surprise, maybe, or the kind of quiet pride that friends showed when you accomplished something they knew had been difficult. "That's... fast. You were panicking about that two days ago."

"Things changed."

He studied me for a moment, that photographer's attention that seemed to catalog everything it saw. The particular way I was sitting. The expression on my face. The quality of my voice when I spoke. He noticed everything, Est. It was what made him good at his job, and it was what made him hard to hide from.

"Good things?" he asked.

"Yeah." I couldn't keep the smile from my face, didn't particularly try. The old Hong would have deflected, would have hidden behind sarcasm or careful neutrality. But I was tired of being the old Hong. "Good things."

Tui finished his line and sat back, stretching his shoulders. His client—a young woman with an elaborate floral piece taking shape on her forearm—took the break as permission to check her phone, her expression the particular mix of endurance and fascination that came from sitting through a long session.

"Lego mentioned you were meeting someone yesterday," Tui said, his tone carefully casual. But I knew him well enough now to hear the genuine curiosity underneath. "Someone important."

Of course Lego had mentioned it. Lego mentioned everything, especially to Tui, especially now that whatever was between them had started to unfold. The two of them were still circling each other—still navigating the complicated territory between friendship and something more—but they'd stopped pretending there wasn't anything to navigate. And that meant that Lego's words found their way to Tui's ears, and vice versa, and the rest of us got to watch from the sidelines as two people who clearly cared about each other slowly figured out how to say so.

"I was." I said.

"And?"

The question was simple, but the weight behind it wasn't. Tui was asking because he cared—about me, about the people in his circle, about the complicated web of connections that made up our shared life. He was asking because chosen family meant wanting to know how things went, wanting to celebrate victories and soften defeats, wanting to be present for the important moments even when you couldn't be there in person.

"And it went better than I expected," I said. "A lot better."

Something relaxed in Tui's expression. Not relief exactly—more like satisfaction. The look of someone who'd been hoping for good news and received it, who'd been worrying quietly and could now set the worry aside.

"I'm glad," he said. And then, returning to his work, his voice soft but certain: "You deserve that."

The words landed somewhere soft in my chest. Such a simple statement. Such an enormous thing, to have people who believed you deserved happiness. Who said it out loud, easily, like it was obvious. Like they'd never for a moment considered that you might not be worthy of the good things that found you.

For years, I'd carried the opposite belief. Had assumed that my differences made me less deserving. That the complications I brought to relationships meant I should settle for less, or nothing at all. That people who got close would eventually see the truth and decide I wasn't worth the trouble.

But here was Tui, saying you deserve that like it was the most natural thing in the world. And here was Est, smiling that quiet smile he got when something felt right. And somewhere across the city was Nut, who'd heard the truth about me and responded with patience and hope and the promise of tomorrow.

Maybe they were right. Maybe I did deserve it.

Est had gone back to his photographing, capturing the half-finished tattoo from different angles. But I caught him smiling too, that expression he got when the pieces of something were falling into place—when the composition was right, when the light was cooperating, when the world was arranging itself into something worth documenting.

"The exhibition's in eleven days," I said, because the silence was getting too comfortable and I needed to break it before I got emotional. I'd done enough crying this week. My tear ducts needed a rest. "You're all still coming, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Est said, not looking up from his camera. "I've already blocked the time in my calendar."

"Same," Tui added. "Lego's been talking about it nonstop. I think he's more excited than you are."

"That's probably true." I thought about Lego, with his star-shaped cookies and his stuffed animal audience and his particular way of making everyone's victories feel like his own. The way he celebrated other people's good news like it was personally happening to him. The way he remembered details—exhibition dates, favorite colors, dietary restrictions—and used them to show up in exactly the right ways at exactly the right times. "He's been... really helpful. Through all of this."

"He usually is." Tui's voice was soft, and there was something in it—a tenderness he usually kept hidden, a recognition of something he was only beginning to let himself acknowledge. "Even when he shouldn't have to be."

There was something in the way he said it—a recognition, maybe, of the weight Lego carried. The awareness that the youngest person in their circle was also one of the strongest. That beneath the bright smiles and the cookies and the constant sunshine was someone who had been carrying everyone else for a very long time, without ever asking to be carried in return.

"He told me you're going to his performance." I said.

Tui nodded, not looking up from his work. His hand was steady, guiding the needle with practiced precision, but I could see something shift in his shoulders. A tension he was trying to hold in check. "I am."

"Good." I let the word carry everything I couldn't say directly—the months of watching him hold back, the frustration of seeing two people who clearly cared about each other maintain unnecessary distance, the hope that something was finally changing. "He needs people who show up."

"I know." Tui's voice was quiet, almost too soft to hear over the buzz of the machine. "I'm trying to be better at that."

The confession was almost off-hand. But it meant something. Tui admitting he needed to improve, that his careful distance had been a problem rather than a protection—that was growth. That was the kind of change that happened slowly, invisibly, until suddenly you looked up and realized someone was different than they used to be.

I thought about my own journey. The years of pushing people away. The walls I'd built to protect myself from the possibility of rejection. The moment in the café when I'd finally told Nut the truth and watched his face for any sign of recoil, any hint that he was already planning his exit.

We were all trying to be better. That was the point. Not perfection—just progress. Not having it figured out—just being willing to figure it out together.

"We all are," I said. "Trying to be better, I mean. That's kind of the point."

Est lowered his camera, something thoughtful in his expression. "When did you get philosophical?"

"Around the time I started hanging out with a nineteen-year-old who collects stuffed animals and dispenses wisdom like a very soft fortune cookie."

That got a laugh from both of them—genuine, warm, the kind of laughter that came from shared understanding. We all knew what Lego was like. We'd all been on the

receiving end of his particular brand of insight, wrapped in pastel aesthetics and delivered with a smile that made it impossible to ignore.

The evening settled around us. Tui finished his session; the client left with fresh bandaging and elaborate aftercare instructions. Est packed up his equipment, reviewing the shots he'd taken on the camera's small screen. I sat in the waiting area and didn't feel the need to fill the silence, content to just exist in the space we'd built together.

This was what chosen family felt like. Not grand gestures or dramatic declarations, but this—showing up, being present, letting the ordinary moments accumulate into something extraordinary. A tattoo studio at the end of a long day, three people who'd found each other against all odds, existing quietly in each other's company.

It wasn't everything. There was still the exhibition to survive, still the future to navigate, still all the small and large challenges that came with being alive. But it was enough. More than enough. It was exactly what I needed.

My phone buzzed.

A message from Nut:

Missing you already. Is that embarrassing to admit?

I smiled at the screen, that warmth spreading through my chest again.

Me: A little. But I'll allow it.

Nut: Generous of you. What are you doing?

Me: Sitting at the tattoo studio. Watching my friends work. Thinking about how strange it is that this is my life now.

Nut: Strange good or strange bad?

I considered the question. Considered the studio around me, the people in it, the exhibition ahead and the relationship beginning and the slow, deliberate work of becoming who I actually was.

Me: Strange good, I typed. Definitely strange good.

Later that night, in my own room, I lay awake with the comfortable exhaustion of a day well spent.

The paintings were ready. Named, described, claimed. The confession was made. The relationship was beginning, tentative and hopeful and nothing like I'd imagined it would be—which meant it was probably exactly what I needed.

The circle of people who knew me—really knew me—had grown by one. And that

one was turning out to be exactly what I'd been afraid to hope for.

I thought about the exhibition. About standing in a gallery while strangers looked at pieces of my soul and tried to understand what they were seeing. It was still terrifying—would probably always be terrifying, to some degree. The vulnerability of being seen wasn't something you got used to. It was something you learned to survive, and then to embrace, and eventually maybe even to need.

But the terror had company now.

Alongside the fear was something else: anticipation. Curiosity. The particular excitement of sharing something honest and seeing how it landed. Of finding out if the things that mattered to you mattered to other people too. Of discovering that you weren't as alone as you'd always believed.

My phone buzzed one more time.

Lego, with a photo attached: The image showed a plate of star-shaped cookies, arranged in what might have been a constellation pattern if you squinted. Beside them, a small stuffed rabbit was positioned as if reaching for one of the cookies, one fuzzy paw extended toward the nearest star.

Lego: Mr. Whiskers says goodnight, And also that you should come eat more cookies tomorrow.

I smiled in the darkness, the screen's glow painting the ceiling with soft blue light.

Me: Tell Mr. Whiskers I'll consider it.

Lego: He says "considering" isn't a real answer.

Me: Fine. Tell him yes.

Lego: He's very pleased. He's doing a little dance.

I laughed softly, the sound absorbed by the quiet room. Somewhere across the city, Lego was probably doing his own version of a little dance, surrounded by soft things and the particular joy of making people smile. He was probably also surrounded by cookie crumbs and planning tomorrow's baking experiment and texting Tui about something that made him light up from the inside.

Growing every day. Holding space for each other's messes and victories alike. I thought about my paintings, waiting in the studio. About the names I'd given them, the stories I'd written, the pieces of myself I'd been willing to share. Almost. Fortress. The Real Me.

They were ready. And finally, I was too.

I closed my eyes, and for once, sleep came easily, The last thought I had before

drifting off was about courage. Not the dramatic kind—not standing on a cliff's edge or facing down something terrifying. But the quiet kind. The kind that came from saying the true thing even when you were scared. The kind that came from showing up, again and again, even when you weren't sure if anyone would notice.

Nut had noticed.

Lego had noticed.

The whole circle of people I'd somehow stumbled into—they'd all noticed. And tomorrow, eleven days from now, strangers in a gallery would have a chance to notice too. To stand in front of my paintings and see something that mattered. To read the descriptions I'd written and feel, maybe, a little less alone.

For everyone who has stood at the edge of connection and wondered if they were brave enough to cross.

For everyone who learned to make themselves safe before they learned they were allowed to be seen.

For everyone who has looked in a mirror and wondered if what they saw was worthy of love.

I'd written those words for other people. But I'd written them for myself too. For the version of me who'd been too afraid to speak, too convinced that speaking would break something. For the boy at 3 AM, painting his reflection because he didn't know how else to ask the question that was eating him alive.

Worthy of love.

The question had an answer now.

Yes.

Yes, even with the complications. Yes, even with the differences. Yes, even with all the ways I didn't fit the template of what a person was supposed to be.

Worthy of love. Of patience. Of people who showed up and stayed.

I was finally starting to believe it. And in eleven days, I would stand in a gallery and invite the world to see what believing looked like.